



The Explanatory Value of Social Movement Theory

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Introduction

Why has the United States had such a difficult time winning the 'hearts and minds' campaign in Iraq? Why is terrorism seemingly on the rise, and what policies could effectively counter this trend? Should Islamists be barred from political institutions or included in the liberalizing or democratization process? The answers to these diverse questions depend on the theoretical framework one subscribes to, and the analytical methodology that is utilized. Each of the above questions are readily explainable when analyzed through the social movement theory (SMT) framework. SMT is an area of political study that focuses on explaining theories of contentious or adversarial politics.^[1] Does SMT provide a richer explanatory value than other concepts or single-dimensional theories?

This article argues that SMT does indeed provide a strong conceptual framework. SMT uses established comparative political theories and methodologies in an integrated, multidimensional framework which takes into account the fluid and complex dynamics that a movement operates in. SMT draws upon processes and mechanisms from rational-choice, structural, and cultural comparative political theories which enable a stronger explanatory value of understanding actions and outcomes. The article provides a big-picture overview of SMT and its current research areas. Examples from the first Palestinian *Intifada* will be used to illustrate the key SMT factors of political opportunity, resource mobilization, and framing. Lastly, the article uses SMT's strong explanatory value to address potential policy implications.

Given the strategic orientation of this paper, the terms group, organization, and movement are used interchangeably. However, there are differences between these terms depending on the variables studied, the unit of analysis, and the level of interaction. At one level of analysis, the SMT framework can also be used to analyze a group or organization in specific detail. At another level of analysis, a group or organization can be part of a larger social movement. Mona Younis describes social movements as collective efforts to achieve political objects outside the normal institutional process. For example, there are many groups (such as Hamas, *Fatah*, etc.) that are part of the over-arching social movement to establish a Palestinian homeland. Both Palestinian *Intifadas* can be analyzed as individual social movements or within the broader historical movement to establish a Palestinian homeland. Historically, analysis of movements has focused on traditional structured hierarchies of formal organizations and processes.^[2]

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SMT focuses on three factors that are integral to the understanding of any social movement, group, or organization. The first key factor analyzed is political opportunity. This factor analyzes the historical and current context a movement finds itself operating within. The second key factor is resource mobilization; which looks at the capacity and ability to mobilize given internal and external dynamics. The third key factor is the framing process; which aids in the ability to generate resonance and support for mobilization.[3] These three factors will be discussed in more detail; but first, the evolution of SMT will be discussed in order to illustrate how it has grown stronger in its explanatory methodology, over time.

Social Movement Theory

In the past, areas of SMT research tended to follow traditional thoughts of contemporary social science. SMT initially analyzed the structural and sociopsychological causes of mass mobilization. It was generally thought that structural strains or constraints produced enough psychological discomfort (sense of isolation and impotence) to then produce collective action (which provided empowerment, belonging, and a sense of control). For example, in attempting to understand Islamic activism in the Middle East, arguments tended to focus on socioeconomic deprivation, cultural imperialism, and the consequences of political or psychological distress. However, as Younis and Quintan Wiktorowicz point out, demography, state strength, modernization, income, class standing, as well as external international support are not sufficient causal mechanisms, alone.[4] The structural and psychological models poorly accounted for why movement mobilization failed to materialize at certain times or what the causal mechanisms were. The models did not account for directed and organized contestation, "Movements are not merely psychological coping mechanisms; they are often explicitly focused and directed toward the political arena." [5] The models also did not effectively explain how mobilization could occur in repressive environments, or why individuals and groups turned to Islamic activism.[6]

In response to some of the sociopsychological explanatory difficulties, resource mobilization theory (RMT), a subset of SMT, put forth that movements were rational, logical, organized responses of collective action. RMT stated social movement organizations (SMOs) were needed to enable strategically directed and sustained activism. SMOs could evolve into organizational models very similar to other bureaucratic entities found in institutionalized politics because of their inherent efficiency, infrastructures, formal institutions, resources, internal community organizations, and division of labor capabilities. Lastly, RMT claimed collective action was dependant on, empowered by, and even limited by external and internal factors. Unfortunately, RMT had a very strong structural component; and it did not take into account the relationships that enabled mobilization. Using the Islamic activism example, the use of mosques, Islamic NGOs, professional and student associations, limited political parties, informal institutions, and social networks are all contributing factors to mobilization. Yet on their own, they do not completely explain the sustainment capability of a movement. RMT predominately analyzed the monetary or material assets available to a formal organization. While RMT was helpful in understanding some aspects of social movements, it did not provide sufficient explanatory power. Several scholars have stated the importance of understanding the larger political opportunities which influence groups or a movement's choices and decisions.[7]

During the 1970s-1980s, there was a renewed interest in post-modernist and social constructionist theories within the social sciences. SMT research focused on how individuals conceptualized themselves; are convinced to participate in collective action; how meaning is constructed, articulated, and disseminated; and on formation of group identity. These framing concepts assessed how a movement markets a particular problem/issue. Framing enabled a better understanding of how movements offer solutions to stated grievances, and how movements provide the rationale needed to motivate support for collective action.[8] The challenge with framing has been in pinning down the causal mechanisms (is it emotive, cognitive, identity, or the cultural environment); the strength of the agent (the role of the individual versus

collective identity and the impact of the leadership); as well as in proving collectively, why a frame resonates.

SMT's explanatory value lies in its ability to help us understand how movements are able to organize and mobilize given the political context. The political opportunities and the resources available give us insight into how groups or organizations interpret grievances, and how these perceived opportunities are translated into the mobilization of resources and activism. The next section uses examples from the 1987-1993 Palestinian *Intifada* to illustrate the explanatory value of political opportunity, resource mobilization, and framing. Outside academia, the Palestinian *Intifada* has been described as a spontaneous protest or reactionary phenomena. The Palestinians have been labeled as refugees and terrorists. Limited classifications such as these, and a failure to understand the complex dynamics of agent, structure, opportunity, or the impact of frames, limits our understanding of a situation or group. Reductionism or overly simplistic labels lead to the development of poor policy recommendations.

SMT Key Factors—Political Opportunity

Movements do not operate in a vacuum; they are a dynamic, fluid, and complex system of relationships, interests, and perceptions. Political opportunity can be boiled down to three primary units of analysis:

1. How inclusive or exclusive the leadership/government is towards opposition or challenge;
2. The opportunities and constraints placed on a movement or group; and
3. The internal changes within a movement or group, and how these changes impact the ability to mobilize, frame, and interact within its operating environment.

Understanding political opportunity permits a more detailed and complex analysis of the leaders, the subgroups, and how they interact, mobilize, frame issues, and seek support.[\[9\]](#)

What was the political space the *Intifada* developed within? In describing the context of the *Intifada*, Samih Farsoun and Jean Landis described an overall environment of, “political suppression, economic exploitation, institutional destructuring, and ideological and cultural repression.”[\[10\]](#) Jamal Nassar and Roger Heacock argued that the Palestinian quality of life had been unbearable and the imbalance of power between Israel and the Palestinians had been in place for years.[\[11\]](#) Since the 1970s there had been an increase in Israeli land confiscation and construction of settlements. Preexisting committees continued to operate in order to assist with the everyday needs of the population under a military occupation. Various labor and trade unions, over time, had become more politicized and formed in an informal, semi-defuse manner.[\[12\]](#)

What changed after 1987 was an intensification of Israeli oppressive tactics which was perceived as indiscriminate violence against the Palestinian population. Increased pressure was applied to the Palestinian economy to try to influence submission and develop employment dependency on Israel. The economic downturn in the oil market in the 1980s, created a steady decline in cash remittances which further hurt quality of life and employment opportunities. In addition, new Israeli economic policies limited or denied Palestinian industry and agriculture that might compete with Israel; which contributed to perceived injustice frames. Israeli efforts to destroy or mitigate the abilities of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), unions, and any organized activity created more political and nationalist forms of activism.[\[13\]](#)

Resource Mobilization

Collective action is costly, in terms of time, interest, incentives, money, and in attempting to alter the political opportunities of the existing institutional system. The ability to mobilize varies from

sporadic (one time) to persistent and organized. The repertoires utilized also influence mobilization. Repertoires are tool sets, or standard operating procedures a movement or organization will use to mobilize. A strike, lobbying, or boycotts are examples of repertoires that have been used by groups. The types of movements and the ways in which mobilization occur, are influenced by the locations/places available for mobilization, as well as by the political opportunities available. For example, in the Middle East, the use of professional associations, student unions, informal study networks, and mosques can shape mobilization.[14] An authoritarian regime as compared to a liberalizing regime, or a democratic regime with emphasis on institutions and the rule of law, presents different resource mobilization opportunities.

The 1987 *Intifada* was a grass-roots, decentralized, mostly nonviolent movement that was sustained for several years. Why? At first glance, the *Intifadas* seemed spontaneous; however, when viewed within the context of the external and internal environment, the institutions used for mobilization had been in place for years. What changed was the political space that enabled new resources to be mobilized. The existing unions and preexisting social organizations created under the Israeli military occupation, as well as the Palestinian informal financial networks, facilitated organized institutional resistance. Add to this the increase in Israeli repressive tactics, and these institutions helped lay the groundwork for the popular committees.[15] The network of popular committees that evolved was based on previous organizations organized around youth, students, women, workers, and social services. Food shortages due to strictly imposed curfews necessitated village and neighborhood food relief committees. Additional committees developed to address issues of education, health, agriculture, and security. The committees helped provide self-help, sufficiency, and policing. There were thousands of committees, at various levels, creating a structure and their “functional diffuseness” helped strengthen the needed cohesion of the Palestinian society; which enabled local networked-linked mass mobilization to occur.[16]

The *Intifada* leadership came from all the political factions who cooperated under a larger, decentralized umbrella organization known as the United National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). The UNLU issued biweekly communiqués; which along with the competing leadership and various security/judicial committees provided: direction, a forum for airing grievances, enforcement, and consequence management within the occupied territories. The popular committees, the strike enforcement groups, the coercive ability to deter collaborators, and the mediation role played by the UNLU, helped form a type of institutionalization for popular mass mobilization.[17] As leaders were arrested, expelled, or killed, the diffuseness of the UNLU enabled others to step into leadership roles. Financial support poured in from the region and internationally, as did aid from various NGOs.

Research shows that social movements tend to be cyclical in nature and that state repression has a role in shaping these dynamics.[18] By 1991 the political environment had changed. Arafat's support for Iraq during the Gulf War cost the Palestinians both political and financial support. Over time, the *Intifada* lost its momentum because groups and the popular committees had become dominated by factionalism which caused a loss in the broad social base of support.[19] In addition, the signing of the Oslo Agreements gave many Palestinians a perception of hope, even though many were angry with Arafat. The *Intifada* lost its resource mobilization sustainment capability due to changes in the external and internal environment which in turn caused the framing resonance to lose its momentum.

Framing

Typically, the goal of framing is to vilify or de-credential the opposition while validating and legitimizing the goals or stated purpose of one's own group.[20] The ability of a movement to transform the potential for mobilization into actual action depends on the movement's ability to frame their issues in a way that resonates with potential participants. This emotive resonance in turn enables support, recruitment, or mobilization. A movement's frames can be a reflection of the collective identity. At the same time, frames can help create identity and shape societal

perceptions.[21] The identification with certain frames can help build solidarity, trust, loyalty, or even a sense of uniqueness.

Frames must be renewed periodically due to the fluid dynamics of political opportunity, a change in a group's membership status, or even in their stated goals and beliefs. Re-enforcing or updating frames permits a group to tap into the collective identity in an attempt to sustain support for that movement.[22] An example of creating meaning through framing is the slogan, "Islam is the solution." Another example can be seen when groups frame the interests of the West in the Middle East as cultural imperialism. Frames can also be used as a method for competition between groups, or even within a group as dissension or intra-movement division occurs (such as between hardliner-softliner, conservative-liberal, radical-moderate, ideologue-pragmatist, etc.)

During the Palestinian *Intifada*, problems were portrayed as unjust grievances through bi-weekly UNLU communiqués. The UNLU helped to provide the goals and grievances that cut across class, socio-political, and even religious lines. For example, the communiqués stated the uprising would continue until it brought about recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination and an independent state.[23] Stated goals were the right to trade, earn money, access to basic education and health care, and an end to the Israeli military appointed councils. These grievances were considered just and helped to create support within Israel, internationally, as well as assist in the sustainment of mass Palestinian mobilization. In addition, the counter-tactics used by Israel enabled a reinforcement of the injustice frames.[24] One other dynamic was the vying for framing hegemony by the groups within UNLU, the PLO executive leadership, and the Islamists in an attempt to sway popular support.

The integrated focus on political opportunity, resource mobilization, and framing has, over time, generated a stronger body of academic research. The next section focuses on the contemporary research areas, which are generally divided into three main areas: violence and contention, networks and alliances, and culture and framing.[25]

Contemporary Research

It is common to label any use of violence outside of sanctioned state action as illegal or as terrorism. However, the use of repression, especially state repression, in response to a social movement can cause a crisis or set the conditions for violence because each side perceives the other as aggressive and threatening. According to one argument of SMT, the use of violence as a means of indiscriminate repression tends to push a movement towards militancy; whereas selective repression can help to push a movement towards non-militancy. Groups participating in a movement tend to become more alienated from the mainstream, or even out of touch with popular society, as they attempt to protect themselves from regime oppression. This process can increase group cohesion due to increased injustice frames, feelings of solidarity, and seeking safety within the group. Selective repression is thought to lessen the support base for those that do carry out violent acts. The use of violence by the state can create a spiral of violence and encapsulation, which increases radical perceptions and polarization of the opposition. Polarization and alienation can create a sense of desensitization towards the use of violence, or even lead to the decision to use it more quickly.[26]

Research also shows that there tends to be an ebb and flow in the level and use of violence by organizations. The decision to use violence is made for a variety of reasons. For example, the use of violence may be made for ideological or religious reasons. Violence can be a calculated tactical decision in response to a particular structure, set of conditions, or circumstances in a given time period. Additional reasons for the use of violence as a tactic include: a desire to protect acquired material resources; the establishment of an informal/formal network of sympathizers and supporters which tend to empower an organization; to send a message; a method to force negotiation; or even as a method for vying for control within an organization.[27]

The second area of contemporary research analyzes networks and alliances and their impact on political opportunity, resource mobilization, and framing. Usually, Western social movements tend to mobilize via structured organizations. Traditionally, SMT research tended to narrowly define a “social movement” as a movement with formal organizations. The conservative perspective of social movement organizations contended that without formal organizations, the opportunity for movement empowerment is either temporary or ineffective. It is argued that only formal organizations decrease the cost of participation and facilitate the mobilization of different groups. As a result, informally structured collective action and its impact on politics and society have been less researched and/or discounted. In collective cultures or in authoritarian regimes, there are formal and informal associational networks of personal relationships. In the Middle East, due to the political opportunities available for many groups or organizations, informal networks serve as resources for movement building, construction of collective identities, and help to inspire a continuum of solidarity. The degree of solidarity depends on the context and dynamics of state repression and exclusion. Wiktorowicz convincingly argues that understanding the full range of Islamic activism and its ability to organize as a mechanism of collective empowerment, requires an examination of both formal and informal modes of organization.^[28] A failure to do so, leads to a monolithic understanding of informal networks and their impact on politics and society.

Culture and framing constitute the third area of contemporary research. Research has predominately focused on understanding why and how frames generate resonance. Scholars are attempting to empirically determine the emotive and cognitive causal mechanisms and their related processes. The goal is to assess the influence these mechanisms have on individual and collective identity development, as well as the surrounding cultural environment. ^[29]

Conclusion

As illustrated with examples from the Palestinian *Intifada*, the use of SMT helps us in understanding the complex dynamics of groups, its support in society, and the political opportunities available. SMT provides an integrated, multidimensional framework which provides a stronger explanatory value than single theories or monolithic analysis of movements. For example, Lieutenant General Ghazali from Pakistan’s National Defense College gave a lecture at Naval Postgraduate School in 2004. He was asked by a student, “If you know the *madrassas* operating in the area are Deobani (Wahhabi background), why don’t you just shut them down?” The General’s response was to explain the more complex dynamics of the *madrassas*, their common use as orphanages, and the reliance on them by the local community for support and education.

We need to understand the diverse goals and strategic objectives of groups, as well as how they operate in society. When fail to recognize the fluid dynamics, the logical structure/actions, or the historical context, we underestimate the influence and impact of movements in the Middle East, and their similarities with other social movements. This in turn can provide faulty analysis and conclusions, or instrumental and overly aggressive policy approaches. The use of SMT helps us to recognize that mobilization and contestation against a government does not occur in a vacuum. Social movements change in different ways based on the specific and fluid social, economic, cultural, and political dynamics.

About the Author

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